
THE HARDEST ROLE

NCOs stand ready to help
the families of fallen Soldiers

STORIES BY JONATHAN (JAY) KOESTER

“The Secretary of the Army has asked me to express his deep regret ...”

These are the words a noncommissioned officer never wants to say, the beginning of a script no NCO wants to read.

For those senior NCOs chosen for the honor of being a casualty notification officer, the words are the beginning of a script that will break a family’s heart. The duty of a CNO isn’t easy. But it’s a necessary and important one for the U.S. Army.





Sgt. 1st Class Luis Alicea, 704th Brigade Support Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, stands close to the mourning family of Sgt. Vorasack Xaysana during planeside honors April 20. Alicea is the casualty assistance officer for the Xaysana family.

Photo by Spc. Samantha B. Koss



Photo courtesy of Ingrid Barrentine

Sgt. 1st Class Jonathan Otis, a casualty assistance officer assigned to Headquarters Company, 5th Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, helps Judah Paci put on his sandal as his mother, Erica, looks on June 23, 2010, at Paci's Steilacoom, Wash., home. Otis became Erica Paci's CAO after the death of her husband, Sgt. Anthony "Tony" Paci, on March 4, 2010, in Afghanistan. "You always hope not to have to do this, but it's an honor," Otis said. "Any case in general would be a privilege because the person gave the ultimate sacrifice."

"There is no more effective way of creating bitter enemies for the Army than by failing to do everything we can possibly do at a time of bereavement," Gen. George C. Marshall says in a quote read early in CNO training. "Nor is there a more effective way of making friends for the Army than by showing we are personally interested in every fatality which occurs."

When a Soldier dies, whether downrange or in-garrison, one of the first things the Army does is activate a team to quickly and respectfully notify the Soldier's family. It is usually a two-person

team, composed of one senior NCO or officer and a chaplain.

By regulation, NCOs must hold the rank of sergeant first class or higher to serve as a CNO; officers must be captain or higher. As a sign of respect, CNOs must hold a rank equal to or higher than the Soldier who died.

After the NCOs of a unit are trained, the selection of a CNO is up to the unit's leader, said Debra Rushbrook, chief of the Casualty Assistance Center at Fort Bliss, Texas. There are 34 Army Casualty Assistance Centers, which train NCOs to become CNOs and provide assistance to

those NCOs and the families of the fallen.

"They (potential CNOs) have to do an eyeball-to-eyeball with the battalion commander to see that the Soldier is not overweight, didn't just recently come back from deployment, didn't just recently suffer a loss, not pending UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice), all those kinds of things," Rushbrook said.

Master Sgt. Tyrone Elvis Johnson, the maintenance NCOIC of operations in the 3rd Expeditionary Sustainment Command at Fort Knox, Ky., talked about his experiences notifying the parents of a fallen Soldier.

“That mission is a hard mission, but as a noncommissioned officer, I feel that you owe that parent or that spouse the proper respect. It has to be done. You have to be a strong noncommissioned officer. It’s one of the hardest missions in the Army.”

MASTER SGT. TYRONE ELVIS JOHNSON

“That mission is a hard mission, but as a noncommissioned officer, I feel that you owe that parent or that spouse the proper respect,” Johnson said. “It has to be done. You have to be a strong noncommissioned officer. It’s one of the hardest missions in the Army.”

Rushbrook said she has heard that sentiment expressed many times.

“The notifiers, pretty much without exception, when they come back, say that’s the hardest thing they’ve ever had to do in their life,” Rushbrook said. “I’ve heard that probably 80 percent of the time. When they come back they say, ‘I’d rather be in combat than have to do that again.’”

Most NCOs who serve as CNOs perform the duty only once or twice as part of their normal service. But Sgt. 1st Class Alberto Borjas serves full-time as a casualty notification/casualty assistance officer with the National Guard’s 224th Sustainment Brigade based in San Bernardino, Calif. He is part of a team of about 10 Soldiers in the state who do notification and assistance as their full-time duty. They are assisted by the Casualty Assistance Center at Fort Huachuca, Ariz. Borjas has served about 28 families, half of those as a CNO.

“You really don’t know how the family is going to react,” Borjas said. “You have a chaplain there with you, but you really can’t prepare for what’s going to happen.”

Borjas said he works on memorizing the notification script during the drive to the family’s house.

“Sometimes the script can be long and you have these cities in Afghanistan or Iraq that you are trying to figure out how to say properly, or even the Soldier’s last name,” Borjas said. “You want to make sure that you say it properly.”

EMOTIONS

Some NCOs protest the duty, saying they are too emotional and wouldn’t be able to do the job without breaking down. But Johnson said emotion and tears can be an important part of the process.

“If you’re emotional, that is part of being compassionate,” Johnson said. “That lets them know you’re human. A lot of people think that because you’re in the Army, that you’re not a human. But they see you shed a tear or you grieve with them, they know you are compassionate.”

It’s important to think of the family instead of your own emotions, said Dwight Wilson, a casualty affairs trainer at Fort Bliss.

“I try to get them not to think of themselves, but to think of the family,” Wilson said. “The duty they’re performing is a service to the family and to the Army. There were a few people who came in during different classes who said they couldn’t do it, but by the end of the classes, they realize they can and that it’s important.”

However, Wilson added, you can’t expect a gracious welcome from the family. You are bringing them the worst news imaginable, and you have to roll with whatever reaction you receive. During the class, NCOs are shown a letter a mother wrote to a notification team a year after they arrived at her door.

“It bothers me all these months later that I was unable to treat you with the respect and honor that you deserved for taking on such a horrible and thankless task: our notification,” an excerpt from Elisabeth Beard’s letter reads. “I remember yelling at my husband not to open the door, and then begging him not to let you inside the house. You were the last person

I wanted to see standing on my porch, and I think I conveyed that to you. I would not speak to you or look at you or shake your hand when you offered it. I guess all my good will and courtesy somehow just drained away and bled out of my heart in those few moments as I saw you standing in the doorway. ...

“The only thing I can do is make amends for that, if you are willing to give me the chance,” the letter continues. “I would be honored if you could visit us again. ... I would shake your hand, and thank you for your service to our country.”

A negative response to the notification team is natural and expected, which is why the next step in the process — casualty assistance — is done by a different Soldier.

The notifying NCO “goes in and drops this bomb that changes your life,” Rushbrook said. “The CNO is nervous, uncomfortable and the bad person. [The family] is not going to have warm, fuzzy feelings about the person who came and brought that news, regardless of how they deliver it. But the casualty assistance officer is the one who comes in behind them and says, ‘OK, this terrible thing happened to you, but I’m going to help you.’ So they get to be the good person. That’s why the notifier isn’t used as the CAO.”

THE NEXT STEP

The family or spouse usually meets their casualty assistance officer the day after the notification. Though families are often left with bad memories of their meeting with their CNO, they get to know their CAO much better and often stay in touch long after the official duty is finished.

“I still have some family members who, during the holidays, will send emails,” Borjas said. “We stay in touch.”



It's rewarding. You get to know the family. They kind of bring you in as one of their own."

In addition to the requirements for being a CNO, a CAO must also be released from conflicting duties. Though a CNO's duty is usually finished within a few hours, a CAO must spend much more time, over many months, helping the family. So by regulation, that Soldier cannot be scheduled for deployment or reassignment within six months.

Besides compassion, the largest part of a CAO's job is making sure the family understands and knows how to obtain the many benefits the Army provides. There

are many forms that need to be filled out, and the family's CAO keeps a checklist to make sure everything is done.

Which family members of the fallen Soldier receive the service of a CAO and other benefits is decided by forms the Soldier had filled out. The primary next of kin, for instance, is determined by DD Form 93.

Soldiers keeping their paperwork up to date could ease a lot of heartbreak, Borjas said.

"There are a lot of things that go on internally with the families, and sometimes you're caught up in the middle," Borjas said. "You will have families who

don't get along. Let's say the wife was supposed to get the benefits, but the father and mother end up getting it.

"For the Soldiers — the documents, the DD-93 and the life insurance form — they have to make sure they constantly keep that updated," Borjas said. "Because if something happens to them and the wrong person gets the benefits ... I have seen a lot of that."

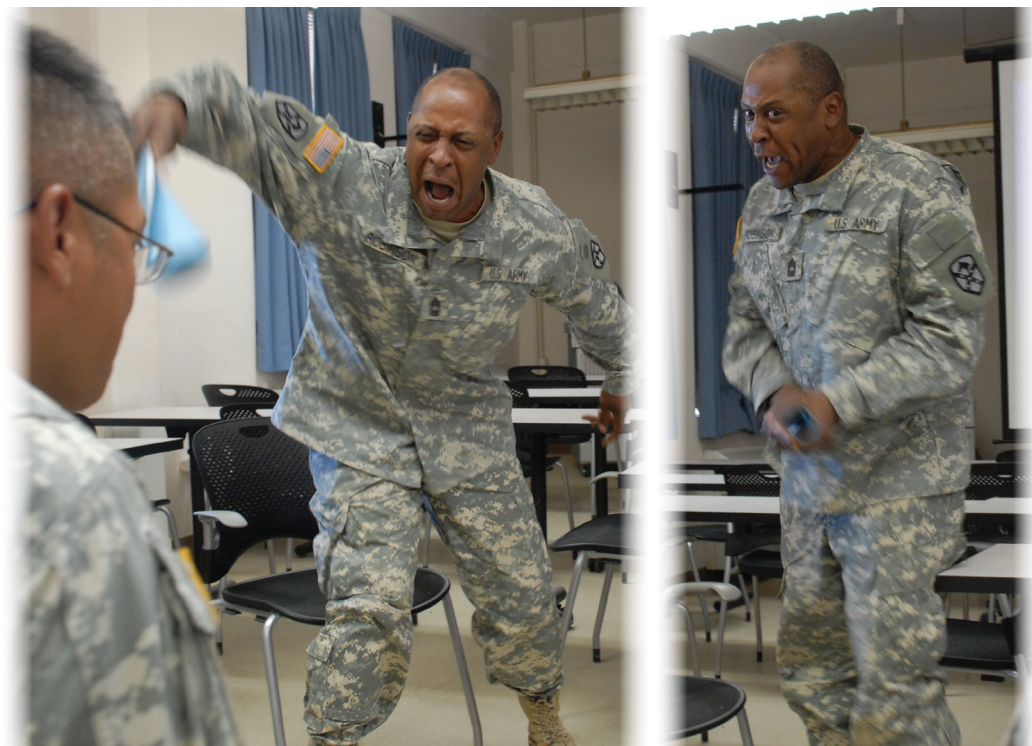
NCOs serving in this duty are also responsible for helping the family understand their funeral and cemetery options, including any travel arrangements that are needed. The NCO will confirm the family's wishes for military funeral honors and coordinate with the military funeral honors team. Helping a family through the funeral can be one of the most emotional parts of the duty.

"I can't say that it's something that I've gotten used to," Borjas said. "The emotion is always there. There's really no way of getting out of the emotional part. Sometimes I'm at the funeral, and they have posters of the Soldier, they have video of the Soldier, and it hits home. It's tough. It's like losing one of your brothers. It's hard to maintain and keep your composure."

Spending so much time with a grieving family can be overwhelming, Johnson

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SGT. 1ST CLASS ALBERTO BORJAS



During the Fort Bliss training to become casualty notification and casualty assistance officers, NCOs participated in role-playing to practice the duty. In this series of photographs, Master Sgt. Joe Robinson of the 15th Sustainment Brigade plays the role of a father who gets angry at the notification team of Master Sgt. Pete Salas (left) and Sgt. 1st Class Eric Anthony. Salas said the role-playing made him realize you have to be prepared for anything and stay calm. "I know Master Sgt. Robinson, and I still had to stop myself from running," Salas said.

Photos by Jonathan (Jay) Koester

said. But CAOs need to take time for themselves, while remembering they are helping that family. Most important is really believing in the duty.

"You need to have the three C's: care, concern and compassion," Johnson said. "You have to want to take care of the family. You can't take this as: 'Well, I've been tasked to do this.' You have to want to do it. You have to want to take care of the family like you would want someone to take care of your family."

TRAINING

Those serving as CNOs and CAOs attend training at one of 34 Army Casualty Assistance Centers. The training usually lasts about three days and focuses slightly more on casualty assistance than casualty notification. Though notification duty is emotional and difficult, it's simpler than the many programs and forms an assistance officer will need to know and understand.

Master Sgt. Zane Morris, brigade maintenance supervisor with the 15th Sustainment Brigade at Fort Bliss recently went through the training. He said, learning about all the assistance a family will receive in the unfortunate event that they lose a loved one made the thought of performing as a CNO or CAO a little easier.

"At first it didn't seem like something that you would want to do," Morris said. "But as you went through the training and you listened to the videos of the people who did it, you kind of realize that, if you can perform the duty in a professional manner, it's actually going to be an extreme asset to the family and help them a lot. So it makes it easier to deal with, knowing how much of an asset you're providing to the family."

Many of the NCOs who went through a recent training session at Fort Bliss were amazed by the benefits families receive when a Soldier dies — from the immediate tax-free \$100,000 "death gratuity" to the ongoing assistance from the Army's Survivor Outreach Services.

"For me, until I took the class, I thought if something happened you got your SGLI (Service members' Group Life Insurance) and that was about it," Morris said. "I didn't realize that the Army provided all of the other monetary items that were more immediate than the SGLI. There were a lot of benefits that I didn't know about. ... It would probably be a good class for more people to take, or incorporate it into the noncommissioned officers education system, so that more NCOs could inform their Soldiers."


Those thoughts were echoed by Mas-

ter Sgt. Pete Salas, operations NCO for the 15th Sustainment Brigade.

"After taking that course, it really put my mind at ease because, the times I've deployed, I was thinking, 'All I'm worth is \$250,000?'" Salas said. "But to know that someone is going to be there to take care of my family ... my wife. We've been in 22 years ... she was glad to know there was more."

To serve as a CNO or CAO, not only do NCOs have to go through the initial training, but they must recertify annually through online training to stay eligible for the duty. The training is important because after the death of a Soldier is not the time to learn on the job, Rushbrook said.

"You only have one time to get it right, with everything we do," Rushbrook said. "For example, with funeral details, we have only one chance to get it right; there are no do-overs. If you make a mistake, the mistake is there forever.

"But if you do it right, if you do a good job, if you take good care of the family, that's also there forever. They'll always remember that you cared, that you took the time, that you helped them through this bad spot in their life." 

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